

What Do Fish Have to Do with Anything?

Avi

Every day Mrs. Markham waited for her son, Willie, to come out of school when it was over. They walked home together. If asked why, Mrs. Markham would say, “Parents need to protect their children.”

One Monday afternoon as they approached their apartment building, she suddenly tugged at Willie. “Don’t look that way,” she said.

“Where?”

“At that man over there.”

As they walked, Willie stole a look back over his shoulder. A man Willie had never seen before was sitting on a red plastic milk crate near the curb. His matted, streaky gray hair hung like a ragged curtain over a dirty face. His shoes were torn. Rough hands lay upon his knees. One hand was palm up.

“What’s the matter with him?” Willie asked.

Keeping her eyes straight ahead, Mrs. Markham said, “He’s sick.” She pulled Willie around. “Don’t stare. It’s rude.”

“What kind of sick?”

Mrs. Markham searched for an answer. “He’s unhappy,” she said.

“What’s he doing?”

“Come on, Willie; you know. He’s begging.”

“Did anyone give him anything?”

“I don’t know. Now come on, don’t look.”

“Why don’t you give him anything?”

“We have nothing to spare.”

When they got home, Mrs. Markham removed a white cardboard box from the refrigerator. It contained poundcake. Using her thumb as a measure, she carefully cut a half-inch-thick piece of cake and gave it to Willie on a clean plate. The plate lay on a plastic mat decorated by images of roses with diamond like dewdrops. She also gave him a glass of milk and a folded napkin.

Willie said, “Can I have a bigger piece of cake?”

Mrs. Markham picked up the cake box and ran a manicured pink fingernail along the nutrition information panel. “A half-inch piece is a portion, and a portion contains the following nutrients. Do you want to hear them?”

“No.”

Make an inference:

Why do you think Mrs. Markham is so concerned about money?

“It’s on the box, so you can accept what it says. Scientists study people and then write these things. If you’re smart enough, you could become a scientist. Like this.” Mrs. Markham tapped the box. “It pays well.”

Willie ate his cake and drank the milk. When he was done, he took care to wipe the crumbs off his face as well as to blot the milk moustache with the napkin.

His mother said, “Now go on and do your homework. You’re in fifth grade. It’s important.”

Willie gathered up his books that lay on the empty third chair. At the kitchen entrance he paused. “What *kind* of unhappiness does he have?”

“Who’s that?”

“That man.”

Mrs. Markham looked puzzled.

“The begging man. The one on the street.”

“Could be anything,” his mother said, vaguely. “A person can be unhappy for many reasons.”

“Like what?”

“Willie...”

“Is it a doctor kind of sickness? A sickness you can cure?”

“I wish you wouldn’t ask such questions.”

“Why?”

“Questions that have no answers shouldn’t be asked.”

“Can I go out?”

“Homework first.”

Willie turned to go.

“Money,” Mrs. Markham suddenly said. “Money will cure a lot of unhappiness. That’s why that man was begging. A salesperson once said to me, ‘Maybe you can’t buy happiness, but you can rent a lot of it.’ You should remember that.”

The apartment had three rooms. The walls were painted mint green. Willie walked down the hallway to his room, which was at the front of the building. By climbing up on the windowsill and pressing against the glass, he could see the sidewalk five stories below. The man was still there.

It was almost five when he went to tell his mother he had finished his school assignments. She was not there. He found her in her bedroom, sleeping. Since she had begun working the night shift at a convenience store—two weeks now—she took naps in the late afternoon.

For a while Willie stood on the threshold, hoping his mother would wake up. When she didn't, he went to the front room and looked down on the street again. The begging man had not moved.

Willie returned to his mother's room.

"I'm going out," he announced softly.

Willie waited a decent interval for his mother to waken. When she did not, Willie made sure his keys were in his pocket. Then he left the apartment.

Standing just outside his door, he could keep his eyes on the man. It appeared as if he had still not moved. Willie wondered how anyone could go on without moving for so long in the chilly October air. Was staying in one place part of the man's sickness?

During the twenty minutes that Willie watched, no one who passed looked in the beggar's direction. Willie wondered if they even saw the man. Certainly no one put any money into his open hand.

A lady leading a dog by a leash went by. The dog strained in the direction of the man sitting on the crate. The dog's tail wagged. The lady pulled the dog away. "Heel!" she commanded.

The dog—tail between its legs—scampered to the lady's side. Even so, the dog twisted around to look back at the beggar.

Willie grinned. The dog had done exactly what he had done when his mother told him not to stare.

Pressing deep into his pocket, Willie found a nickel. It was warm and slippery. He wondered how much happiness you could rent for a nickel.

Squeezing the nickel between his fingers, Willie walked slowly toward the man. When he came before him, he stopped, suddenly nervous. The man, who appeared to be looking at the ground, did not move his eyes. He smelled bad.

"Here." Willie stretched forward and dropped the coin into the man's open right hand.

"Bless you," the man said hoarsely, as he folded his fingers over the coin. His eyes, like high beams on a car, flashed up at Willie, then dropped.

Willie waited for a moment, then went back up to his room. From his front room he looked down on the street. He thought he saw the coin in the man's hand but was not sure.

After supper Mrs. Markham got ready to go to work. She kissed Willie good night. Then, as she did every night, she said, "If you have regular problems, call Mrs. Murphy downstairs. What's her number?"

"274-8676," Willie said.

"Extra bad problems, call Grandma."

"369-6754."

"Super-special problems, you can call me."

"962-6743."

“Emergency, the police.”

“911.”

“Don’t let anyone in the door.”

“I won’t.”

“No television past nine.”

“I know.”

“But you can read late.”

“You’re the one who’s going to be late,” Willie said.

“I’m leaving,” Mrs. Markham said.

After she went, Willie stood for a long while in the hallway. The empty apartment felt like a cave that lay deep below the earth. That day in school Willie’s teacher had told them about a kind of fish that lived in caves. These fish could not see. They had no eyes. The teacher had said it was living in the dark cave that made them like that.

Before he went to bed, Willie took another look out the window. In the pool of light cast by the street lamp, Willie saw the man.

On Tuesday morning when Willie went to school, the man was gone. But when he came home from school with his mother, he was there again.

“Please don’t look at him,” his mother whispered with some urgency. During his snack Willie said, “Why shouldn’t I look?”

“What are you talking about?”

“That man. On the street. Begging.”

“I told you. He’s sick. It’s better to act as if you never saw them. When people are that way, they don’t wish to be looked at.”

“Why not?”

Mrs. Markham thought for a while. “People are ashamed of being unhappy.”

“Are you sure he’s unhappy?”

“You don’t have to ask if people are unhappy. They tell you all the time.”

“Is that part of the sickness?”

“Oh, Willie, I don’t know. It’s just the way they are.”

Willie contemplated the half-inch slice of cake his mother had just given him. He said, “Ever since Dad left, you’ve been unhappy. Are you ashamed?”

Mrs. Markham closed her eyes. “I wish you wouldn’t ask that.”

Willie said, “Are you?”

“Willie...”

“Think he might come back?”

“It’s more than likely,” Mrs. Markham said, but Willie wondered if that was what she really thought. He did not think so. “Do you think Dad is unhappy?”

“Where do you get such questions?”

“They’re in my mind.”

“Fish that live in caves have no eyes.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My teacher said it’s all that darkness. The fish forget to see. So they lose their eyes.”

“I doubt she said that.”

“She did.”

“Willie, you have too much imagination.”

After his mother went to work, Willie gazed down onto the street. The man was there. Willie thought of going down, but he knew he was not supposed to leave the building when his mother worked at night. He decided to speak to the man tomorrow.

Next afternoon—Wednesday—Willie said to the man, “I don’t have any money. Can I still talk to you?”

The man’s eyes focused on Willie. They were gray eyes with folds of dirty skin beneath them. He needed a shave.

“My mother said you were unhappy. Is that true?”

“Could be,” the man said.

“What are you unhappy about?”

The man’s eyes narrowed as he studied Willie intently. He said, “How come you want to know?”

Willie shrugged.

“I think you should go home, kid.”

“I am home.” Willie gestured toward the apartment. “I live right here. Fifth floor. Where do you live?”

“Around.”

“Are you unhappy?” Willie persisted.

Make an inference:

**What might the fish stand for?
What might the missing eyes and
the darkness symbolize?**

**Use context clues to define
vocabulary words.**

The man ran a tongue over his lips. His Adam's apple bobbed.
Willie said, "I'm trying to learn about unhappiness."

"Why?"

"I don't think I want to say."

"A man has the right to remain silent," the man said and closed his eyes.
Willie remained standing on the pavement for a while before walking back to his apartment.
Once inside his own room, he looked down from the window. The man was still there. At one moment Willie was certain he was looking at the apartment building and the floor on which Willie lived.

The next day—Thursday—after dropping a nickel in the man's palm, Willie said, "I've decided to tell you why I want to learn about unhappiness."

The man gave a grunt.

"See, I've never seen anyone look so unhappy as you do. So I figure you must know a lot about it."

The man took a deep breath. "Well, yeah, maybe."

Willie said, "And I need to find a cure for it."

"A *what*?"

"A cure for unhappiness."

The man pursed his lips and blew a silent whistle. Then he said, "Why?"

"My mother is unhappy."

"Why's that?"

"My dad left."

"How come?"

"I don't know. But she's unhappy all the time. So if I found a cure for unhappiness, it would be a good thing, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose."

Willie said, "Would you like some cake?"

"What kind?"

"I don't know. Cake."

"Depends on the cake."

On Friday Willie said to the man, "I found out what kind of cake it is."

“Yeah?”

“Poundcake. But I don’t know why it’s called that.”

“Probably doesn’t matter.”

For a moment neither said anything. Then Willie said, “In school my teacher said there are fish that live in caves and the caves are dark, so the fish don’t have eyes. What do you think? Do you believe that?”

“Sure.”

“You do? How come?”

“Because you said so.”

“You mean, just because someone *said* it you believe it?”

“Not someone. You.”

Willie said, “But, well, maybe it *isn’t* true.”

The man grunted. “Hey, do you believe it?”

Willie nodded.

“Well, you’re not just anyone. You got eyes. You see. You ain’t no fish.”

“Oh.”

“What’s your name?”

“Willie.”

“That’s a boy’s name. What’s your grownup name?”

Willie thought for a moment. “William, I guess.”

“And that means another thing.”

“What?”

“I’ll take some of that cake.”

Willie smiled. “You will?”

“Just said it, didn’t I?”

“I’ll get it.”

Willie ran to the apartment. He took the box from the refrigerator as well as a knife, then hurried

Make an inference:

What does the man mean when he tells Willie, “You ain’t no fish”?

Make an inference:

Why does the man ask Willie what his “grownup” name is?

back down to the street. "I'll cut you a piece," he said.

As the man looked on, Willie opened the box, then held his thumb against the cake to make sure the portion was the right size. With a poke of the knife he made a small mark for the proper width.

Just as he was about to cut, the man said, "Hold it!"

Willie looked up. "What?"

"What were you doing with your thumb there?"

"I was measuring the right size. The right portion. One portion is what a person is supposed to get."

"Where'd you learn that?"

"It says so on the box. You can see for yourself." He held out the box.

The man studied the box, then handed it back to Willie. "That's just lies," he said. "How do you know?"

"William, how can a box say how much a person needs?"

"But it does. The scientists say so. They measured, so they know. Then they put it there." Lies," the man repeated.

Willie studied the man. His eyes seemed bleary. "Then how much should I cut?" he asked.

The man said, "You have to look at me, then at the cake, and then you're going to have to decide for yourself."

"Oh." Willie looked at the cake. The piece was about three inches wide. Willie looked up at the man. After a moment he cut the cake into two pieces, each an inch and a half wide. He gave one piece to the man and kept the other.

"Bless you," the man said, as he took the piece and laid it in his left hand. He began to break off pieces with his right hand and one by one put them into his mouth. Each piece was chewed thoughtfully. Willie watched him piece by piece.

When the man was done, he dusted his hands of crumbs.

"Now I'll give you something," the man said.

"What?" Willie said, surprised.

"The cure for unhappiness."

"You know it?" Willie asked, eyes wide.

The man nodded.

"What is it?"

Make an inference:

Why does Willie give the man both pieces of cake? What might the cake symbolize?

“It’s this: What a person needs is always more than they say.”

Willie thought for a while. “Who’s *they*?” he asked.

The man pointed to the cake box. “The people on the box,” he said.

Willie thought for a moment; then he gave the man the other piece of cake.

The man took it, saying, “Good man,” and then ate it.

The next day was Saturday. Willie did not go to school. All morning he kept looking down from his window for the man, but it was raining and he did not appear. Willie wondered where he was but could not imagine it.

Willie’s mother woke about noon. Willie sat with her while she ate the breakfast he had made. “I found the cure for unhappiness,” he announced.

“Did you?” his mother said. She was reading a memo from the convenience store’s owner.

“It’s, ‘What a person needs is always more than they say.’”

His mother put her papers down. “That’s nonsense. Where did you hear that?”

“That man.”

“What man?”

“On the street. The one who was begging. You said he was unhappy. So I asked him.”

“Willie, I told you I didn’t want you to even look at that man.”

“He’s a nice man...”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve talked to him.”

“When? How much?”

Willie shrank down. “I did, that’s all.”

“Willie, I forbid you to talk to him. Do you understand me? Do you? Answer me!”

“Yes,” Willie said, but in his mind he decided he would talk to the man one more time.

He needed to explain why he could not talk to him anymore.

On Sunday, however, the man was not there. Nor was he there on Monday.

“That man is gone,” Willie said to his mother as they walked home from school.

“I saw. I’m not blind.”

“Where do you think he went?”

“I couldn’t care less. And you might as well know, I arranged for him to be gone.”

Willie stopped short. “What do you mean?”

“I called the police. We don’t need a nuisance like that around here. Pestering kids.”

“He wasn’t pestering me.”

“Of course he was.”

“How do you know?”

“Willie, I have eyes. I can see.”

Willie stared at his mother. “No, you can’t. You’re a fish. You live in a cave.”

“Willie, don’t talk nonsense.”

What is the simile here?
What do the fish symbolize?

“My name isn’t Willie. It’s William.” Turning, he walked back to the school playground. Mrs. Markham watched him go. “Fish,” she wondered to herself; “what do fish have to do with anything?”

Make an inference:

Is Willie being fair when he tells his mother that she’s a fish living in a cave? Why or why not?

What Do Fish Have to Do with Anything?

Reading Check

- a. What does Willie do when Mrs. Markham tells him not to look at the homeless man?
- b. Why does Mrs. Markham refuse to give the man money?
- c. According to Willie’s teacher, why did the fish in the cave lose their eyes?
- d. What does Willie give the man?
- e. What happens to the man at the end of the story?

First Thoughts

1. How did you feel when you learned that Mrs. Markham had called the police?

Thinking Critically

2. **Summarize** the conversation Willie has with the homeless man about the right amount of cake to serve a person. What do you think the man is trying to say to Willie?
3. Look back at the statements you rated on page 556. Where are they expressed in the story? How has reading the story affected the way you look at the statements?

4. Avi mentions fish many times in this story. What do the fish **symbolize**? (Think about the **inferences** you made as you read.)
5. Who says, "What do fish have to do with anything?" Do you think the quotation makes a good title for the story? Explain. How does the title relate to the story's theme?

Extending Interpretations

6. Why do you think Willie wants to be called William at the end? What does this show about the way his **character** has grown and changed during the story?
7. On page 566, Avi says, "Don't be satisfied with answers others give you. Don't assume that because everyone believes a thing, it is right *or* wrong. Reason things out for yourself. Work to get answers on your own." Is Avi's advice good, or could it lead to trouble?

Speaking and Listening

Debating Pros and Cons

In some cities, people can be arrested for begging on the street. Is this fair? With a few classmates, hold a debate on this question. Form two teams—one to argue that it is fair and one to argue that it's not. **Ask teams where they could look to find evidence supporting your point of view.**

Respond to quote in writing portfolio: (Display on pro board)

"Listen and watch the world around you. Try to understand why things happen. Don't be satisfied with answers others give you. Don't assume that because everyone believes a thing, it is right *or* wrong. Reason things out for yourself. Work to get answers on your own."

Is Avi's advice good, or could it lead to trouble?